

Becoming a Classroom of Readers

What makes students want to read?

Donalyn Miller

As I stand in the hallway, monitoring students at their lockers before school begins, Emily wanders over to chat. She has been reading *Fever 1793* by Laurie Halse Anderson (Simon and Schuster, 2000), a historical fiction novel about the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia. The events in the book have piqued Emily's interest in medicine and epidemics.

Emily is full of questions. "Mrs. Miller, why did people back then have such weird ideas about diseases? Why did they drain people's blood and feed them nasty herbs to cure them?"





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Didn't they know that mosquitoes caused yellow fever? Why do we know this now, but no one knew it then?"

"Well," I tell her, "scientists' study of infectious diseases like yellow fever has occurred over time, and years ago, we didn't know what caused many illnesses or how to treat them. There is a great nonfiction book called *An American Plague* by Jim Murphy (Clarion, 2003) that can give you more information about the 1793 yellow fever epidemic. Would you like to read it? We have a copy in the school library."

Emily agrees to read Murphy's book next and heads off to science class, where her newfound interest in infectious diseases will serve her well. During the 10 minutes between the first bell and the second, I discuss the Japanese invasion of Burma during World War II with Brian, who is reading Roland Smith's *Elephant Run* (Hyperion, 2007); debate the negative consequences of time travel explored in Rebecca Stead's *When You Reach Me* (Wendy Lamb, 2009) with Hanna; and define and pronounce *crenellated* for Grant, who declares

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that Christopher Paolini overuses the word in *Eragon* (Knopf, 2003). None of these students is in my first period language arts class, but their books provoke questions that cannot wait. As a reader, I enjoy these conversations, but as a teacher, I appreciate the intellectual power these students are gaining through reading.

The Need to Read

Numerous studies prove that wide reading improves children's comprehension, background knowledge, vocabulary, fluency, and writing (Krashen, 2004). Unfortunately, in many schools the poorest readers read the least, often as much as three times less than their peers (Allington, 2006). Many students identified as struggling readers early in their educations continue to receive reading intervention and tutoring throughout their school lives, never catching up with their peers. No matter what instructional methods we employ, students must spend substantial time applying the reading skills and strategies we teach before they develop reading proficiency. To become good readers,

students must read and read and read.

The challenge for many teachers lies in motivating and inspiring students to pick up a book in the first place. Developing or struggling readers often lack the experience and confidence to choose books for themselves, read for extended periods of time, or consistently apply reading strategies across texts. Dormant readers, who possess the reading skills needed for academic tasks, see reading as a school job—not as an activity in which they would willingly engage outside school. How do we instill lasting reading behaviors in all our students?

Lifelong readers possess certain habits that we can explicitly model and teach our students. By redesigning our classrooms to support young readers as they practice and internalize the behaviors of avid readers, we can increase our students' engagement in reading and reap the benefits that prolific reading engenders.

Making Time

When I announce, “Ladies and gentlemen, come to a stopping spot,” my students groan. Their complaints are music to my ears. I learned long ago that the only way I could guarantee that my students read was to dedicate time for them to read in class every day. The Commission on Reading's report *Becoming a Nation of Readers* (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) recommends two hours of silent sustained reading a week, but increasing curriculum demands and the need to prepare students for standardized tests have made independent reading time a luxury in many classrooms. Knowing that voracious readers make time to read every day, how do we carve out more reading time for students?



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Teach students to carry a book wherever they go and to enjoy a few minutes of reading time.

I set aside as much as 30 minutes a day for my 6th grade students to read in class. During this time, I confer with students about the books they are reading, ask students to read to me while I assess their comprehension and fluency, and work with students in small groups.

If dedicating chunks of your instructional day for independent reading seems difficult, you can still find time for students to read more. In my own school, I realized that there was a lot of wasted time spent waiting in lines for picture day, field trips, the bus, and

assemblies—time when my students could read. After all, adult readers carry books with us for those times when we must unexpectedly wait. We read at the airport, at the doctor's office, and on the train.

Teach students to carry a book wherever they go and to enjoy a few minutes of reading time. Those stolen moments add up over a year. Young readers learn what committed readers know—keeping a book with you alleviates boredom! My students have even learned to pull out their books whenever visitors at the door, phone calls, and technology glitches interrupt classroom instruction.

Maximizing wasted moments in the school day may garner as much as an hour each week of reading time for students, but we can allocate more reading time by eliminating warm-ups and “when you are done” activities. At a recent conference, I asked the crowd to identify the true purpose of warm-ups and bell ringers, those activities that we have ready for students to complete when they enter our classrooms. Embar-

Our 15 Favorite Books

Chosen by Donalyn Miller's 6th Grade Classes

Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney (Diary of a Wimpy Kid series; Amulet, 2007). Greg Heffley, loser/ hero, records his triumphs and trials while navigating the harsh world of middle school. Kinney's childlike cartoons enhance Greg's story.



Found by Margaret Peterson Haddix (Simon and Schuster, 2008). When Chip and Jonah receive cryptic letters in the mail, the boys embark on an investigation to uncover the secret surrounding their mysterious adoptions 13 years before. Also recommended is the sequel, *Sent* (Simon and Schuster, 2009).

Gone by Michael Grant (HarperTeen, 2008). In Perdido Beach, Florida, life is normal (mostly) until a sudden disruption results in the disappearance of every person over 15. Left to fend for themselves without computers, cell phones, or television, the remaining children must band together to survive. Also recommended is the sequel, *Hunger* (HarperTeen, 2009).



Heat by Mike Lupica (Philomel, 2006). The star pitcher on his Little League team, Michael hides his father's death and his illegal immigrant status so he can continue to play the game.

The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (Scholastic, 2008). Welcome to Panem, a post-apocalyptic United States. As punishment for the rebellion that led to war, each of 12 districts must send tributes to compete in the Hunger Games. One boy and one girl, chosen by lottery, must fight the other competitors to the death until only one remains. Also recommended is the sequel, *Catching Fire* (Scholastic, 2009).



Leviathan by Scott Westerfeld (Simon Pulse, 2009). World War I is reimagined as a clash between the Clankers, who rely on elaborate war machines, and the Darwinists, who craft weaponry from biologically engineered animals. Keith Thompson's elaborate black-and-white illustrations bring Westerfeld's steampunk world to life.

The Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan (Percy Jackson and the Olympians series; Hyperion, 2005). Bounced out of six schools in six years and diagnosed with ADHD, Percy Jackson finds out that he is really a demigod, descended from the Olympians of Greek mythology.

The London Eye Mystery by Siobhan Dowd (David Fickling, 2009). Ted, a young man with Asperger's syndrome and a fondness for weather forecasts, works with his older sister, Kat, to find their cousin, Salim, who has disappeared while riding the London Eye observation wheel.

Masterpiece by Elise Broach (Henry Holt, 2008). James Pompaday, a lonely 11-year-old boy, discovers a new friend in Marvin, a beetle who lives under the kitchen sink. After Marvin creates a marvelous drawing using James's pen and ink set, the two friends embark on an adventure to trap art forgers at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Maze of Bones by Rick Riordan (The 39 Clues series; Scholastic, 2008). When Gracie Cahill, the last matriarch of the Cahill family, dies, her will challenges her heirs to uncover the 39 clues that will reveal the source of the family's power. Each installment in the series is written by a well-known children's author.



The Maze Runner by James Dashner (Delacorte, 2009). Thomas, deprived of all memories except his name, is trapped in the Glade, a community surrounded by an ever-changing maze. Thomas works with the other Gladers to find an escape route and an explanation for their imprisonment.

NERDS: National Espionage, Rescue, and Defense Society by Michael Buckley (Amulet, 2009). Six unpopular but brilliant elementary school students turn their nerdy qualities into assets with technological enhancements. Using a secret spy base hidden inside their school, the NERDS fight evil geniuses around the globe.

Peak by Roland Smith (Harcourt, 2007). After he is arrested for climbing and tagging skyscrapers, Peak Marcelo must live with his estranged father, a professional mountain climber who leads expeditions up Mount Everest.



Stormbreaker by Anthony Horowitz (Alex Rider series; Philomel, 2001). When his uncle (and guardian) is killed in a supposed car accident, Alex Rider discovers that his uncle was an M16 agent. Reluctantly recruited by the agency, Alex attempts to find his uncle's killers and complete his final mission.

When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead (Wendy Lamb, 2009). Obsessed with *A Wrinkle in Time* and helping her mom win a spot on *The \$20,000 Pyramid*, Miranda suddenly sees her life grow more complicated when she receives mysterious notes that eerily predict her future.

rassed, most teachers admitted that these activities were designed so that they could take attendance or make sure students are working as soon as class begins.

Common warm-up activities in language arts classrooms, such as editing sentences, vocabulary study, or journal prompts, may yield limited instructional benefits; but none produce the same level of academic power as 15 minutes of reading time. The same could be said for “when you are done” activities and enrichment folders. I tell my students that they are never done: When they finish class work, they read. Students can gain as much as 20 minutes of extra reading in class each day when teachers designate reading as the only activity for any class time not used for instruction and practice.

Having time to read in class motivates my students to read more at home, too. Captivated by the books they’re reading, they cannot wait until the next school day to continue their books. Recently, I received an e-mail from a mother who discovered the night before that her son had fallen asleep while reading Scott Westerfeld’s newest science fiction epic, *Leviathan* (Simon Pulse, 2009).

Every morning and after school breaks, students swarm me to share how their love of reading seeps over into their personal lives. As teachers and parents, we know that people who read when no one requires it are truly readers.

Giving Freedom

Although providing my students with more time to read dramatically increases the amount of reading they do, no single practice inspires my students to read as much as the opportunity to choose their own books. Learners who lack input into decision making feel powerless and unmotivated—this is true for adults, for teachers, and for our students (Cambourne, 1995).

We may spend weeks designing the perfect novel units, carefully selecting

interesting texts and crafting meaningful activities, only to discover that our students merely plod through the book and our assignments. In addition, no one text or activity can possibly meet the needs of the diverse range of reading levels and interests found in the typical classroom.

So how can we accomplish our instructional goals and ensure that our students will be engaged? I have done away with whole-class novel units and allowed my students to choose their own books. A recent conversation I had with students about Suzanne Collins’s futuristic novel *The Hunger Games* (Scholastic, 2008) confirmed my belief about whole-class novels. I never

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assigned *The Hunger Games* to my students, but after I mentioned it in book talks and offered it to my after-school book club, the book’s popularity spread like wildfire. Of my 93 students, almost 60 of them have read or plan to read this book.

When I asked one student, Adam, why this book was so popular, he told me, “You made the book sound so exciting, and I decided to read it because I thought I would be missing out. The book was amazing! I loved the action and terror of the Games, and I thought that Katniss [the protagonist] was a great character. When she volunteered to take her sister’s place in the games, I thought it was so brave.”

Curious, I asked, “Adam, knowing that this book is worth reading, with lots of topics we could discuss in class,

what would you think about my assigning this book to the entire class? Most of you are reading it, anyway. Obviously, many students would enjoy it.”

My question sparked a wave of head shaking and protests from Adam and his classmates who were discussing the book with us. “No, no, please don’t! When teachers tell us we have to read a book, we hate it. We like it that we get to choose what we read.” Even though I could use heartfelt recommendations, thought-provoking discussions, probing questions, and many other techniques I was using in book talks and small-group discussions when teaching a novel to the entire class, my students’ reactions revealed that the most important factor for them was having the choice to read the book. (See the list on p. 33 for some of my students’ favorite books.)

Options and Requirements

Asking some students to read devolves into a struggle to get them to pick up a book in the first place, so I don’t provide students with the option of not reading. Instead, I ask students what book they *will* be reading today. I move the opportunity for choice to book selection. Allowing students to choose what they will read gives them power and removes the opportunity to refuse to read at all. That will be enough to motivate some students.

I require my students to read 40 books each year, in a mix of genres from nonfiction to fiction to poetry. Requiring my students to read widely exposes them to more genres, authors, vocabulary, and background knowledge than I could ever accomplish by teaching a few texts each year; and it helps students discover and develop their own reading tastes.

My instruction is focused on the knowledge and skills students must learn to meet state and district requirements. All students learn how to infer a book’s themes, predict resolutions, identify figu-



think the student might like and be able to read.

The Gift of Reading

The more students read, the better readers they become. By dedicating reading time, recommending books, exposing students to a variety of texts and authors, and validating their reading choices, I've seen students' interest and motivation to read increase. Students' background knowledge, understanding of text structure and features, vocabulary usage, appreciation for authors' craft, and performance on a wide array of assessments improve tremendously because of the reading they do. For it is only through volumes and volumes of reading that many students internalize the comprehension skills and gain the reading experience they must acquire for academic success.

Of course, hours and hours spent reading and the freedom to choose their own books also leads many children to discover a love of books and reading—a path to enjoyment and learning that lasts long after schooling ends. This is an immeasurable gift. **EL**

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Donalyn Miller teaches 6th grade language arts at Trinity Meadows Intermediate School in Bedford, Texas. She is the author of *The Book Whisperer: Awakening the Inner Reader in Every Child* (Jossey-Bass, 2009); thebookwhisperer@gmail.com.

rative language, and so on, but each student chooses his or her own books to practice and perfect these skills.

For students who lack reading experience and confidence in choosing books, I introduce a wide range of books and authors through readalouds and shared reading, where all students follow along as I read. Shared reading provides support for developing readers because the teacher scaffolds texts that students may not be able to read on their own. By following a more fluent reader, students can focus on comprehension instead of decoding. Students frequently seek out books and authors that we share in class. I often use the first chapter of a book as a teaching piece, then place the book on the chalkboard rail for students to enjoy. The book rarely lasts the day before a student checks it out to read.

When students select books on their own, I condone their choices. Books like the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* series and the *Bone* graphic novels are popular with young readers, but teachers often denounce such books because they are short, are said to lack literary merit, or

contain too many pictures. But consider that any girl who reads the entire *Twilight* series has read over a thousand pages of text. Surely, this is a powerful reading accomplishment! I celebrate any reading my students do.

When students see that I value their reading choices, they begin to trust themselves to select their own reading material and trust me to suggest more books. I tap into this relationship to move students toward more challenging, meatier books over time. For example, when I noticed that Shayla loved books about animals, particularly horses and dogs, I used her interest in Laurie Halse Anderson's *Vet Volunteers* series to suggest more challenging books like Anna Sewell's classic *Black Beauty*.

I work closely with students who struggle to select books or commit to a reading plan; I help them set short-term goals, such as reading so many pages per week or finishing one book. I encourage and praise these students for every step they take toward their reading goals. For students who resist trying anything, I have assigned a book as a last resort, choosing a title that I